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ABSTRACT

This publication on self-assessment in British further education colleges is intended to help in streamlining existing systems and in creating new quality assurance systems. The first section makes suggestions for quality policies and definitions: define quality at the college level, devise a quality policy, break down college activities into key areas, and agree on quality criteria for each area. The second section makes recommendations for development of a coherent quality assurance system: devise quality standards; decide how to measure each standard; set up systems to collect information to measure performance against standards; integrate this system with planning cycles; and establish reporting mechanisms. The third section makes suggestions for systematic self-assessment for each key area: receive regular reports from the quality assurance system; analyze performance against standards; identify strengths and areas for further development; judge the quality of provision and recommend priority areas for action; and recommend improvement targets. It also makes suggestions for the college level: develop an overall assessment of the college's performance, strengths, and priority areas for improvement and write an annual college self-assessment report. The fourth section makes recommendations for postassessment action plan: identify the improvement team and clarify its task, authority, and targets; undertake detailed analysis of current practice; consider ways of bringing about change; decide on action; implement and monitor changes; and evaluate success of changes. Two appendices describe the legislative context and the inspection/assessment frameworks in England and Wales. Contains 20 references. (YLB)

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Towards self-assessing colleges

Stella Dixon

Volume 1 Number 4

FE MATTERS

FEDA paper

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Towards self-assessing colleges

Stella Dixon

FE MATTERS

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Contents

Foreword	5
Executive summary	7
1. Why self assessment?	9
2. Quality policies and definitions	11
3. Developing a coherent quality assurance system	15
4. Systematic self assessment or self evaluation	19
5. Post-assessment action plans and action for improvement	23
6. Conclusions	27
Appendix 1: The legislative context	28
Appendix 2: The inspection/assessment frameworks in England and Wales	29
Appendix 3: References	30

Foreword

This publication is very timely. The Funding Councils in England and Wales, and colleges themselves, are attaching increasing importance to self-assessment.

Both the English and Welsh funding councils have been preparing draft revised frameworks for inspection, which they plan to consult colleges on during the summer. The intention is that they will form the basis for the second quadrennial round of inspections starting in September 1997. In England more emphasis will be placed on college self-assessment validated through inspection. This is very much in line with the general thrust of Government policy, which is to encourage education and training institutions to take greater responsibility for quality assurance. FEDA strongly supports this policy, and we will continue our efforts to help colleges to produce rigorous and reliable self-assessments. It is clear that there is much to be done.

The Chief Inspector has been critical, rightly, of the standard of many college self-assessments in the current inspection round. It will be important to make good progress here, not least because of the prospect for further development of the quality assurance arrangements. We do not yet know the basis on which the English FEFC will consult the sector. However, it seems likely that they will propose that, following the next quadrennial cycle, there should be an orderly move to some form of college accreditation, under which accredited colleges would take substantially more responsibility for their own quality assessment.

This publication argues that self-assessing colleges are likely to be successful, improving colleges able to grow and prosper in the current climate. It builds on *The Preparation of Self-Assessment Reports* (FEU, 1995), and together with the associated series of FEDA events, is intended to help colleges:

- collect the evidence they need to make judgements
- make rigorous assessments of their performance
- identify priorities for further improvement

We will also support colleges by offering consultancy services in this area.

Stephen Crowne
Chief Executive, FEDA

Executive summary

There is growing recognition of the central role of self-assessment in improving the quality of provision in colleges for students and other customers. Self-assessing colleges are not only more likely to meet the needs of their customers; they are also more likely to survive, prosper and be seen to deliver quality provision, which will encourage further growth. In short, self-assessing colleges are likely to be successful, improving colleges. Moreover, there are many who would equate the ability to self assess with the maturity of the FE sector.

This publication is intended to help both in streamlining existing systems and in creating new quality assurance systems by providing guidance on:

- quality policies and definitions
- the development of a coherent quality assurance system
- systematic self assessment
- post-assessment action plans, their implementation and evaluation

Key points from all these areas are summarised below.

Defining quality

- define quality at college level, taking into account the needs of customers, the requirements of external stakeholders, the mission and strategic direction of the college
- devise a quality policy for the college
- decide how to break down the college activities into key areas
- agree desired features or quality criteria for each area

Developing a coherent quality assurance system

- devise quality standards based on agreed desired features for each agreed key area of the college
- decide how each standard will be measured
- set up coherent systems to collect the information which will enable performance to be measured against standards
- integrate this system with planning cycles, ensuring as little additional burden on college staff as possible
- decide upon and set up appropriate reporting mechanisms

Self assessment

- for each key area of (or, in Wales, programme area in) the college to:
  - —receive regular reports from the college quality assurance system of data showing performance against agreed quality standards
  - —analyse performance against standards
  - —identify strengths and areas for further development
  - —judge the quality of provision and recommend priority areas for action
  - —recommend improvement targets
- at college level:
  - —receive and consider reports about different aspects of the college
  - —agree an overall assessment of the college's performance, its strengths and priority areas for improvement, with targets based on the evidence provided, recommendations and the strategic direction of the college
  - —write an annual college self-assessment report
  - —ensure that the conclusions of the self-assessment report inform future planning cycles

Post-assessment action plans

- identify the improvement team and its remit, including its relationship with the college management structure
- clarify the team's task, its authority, targets and timescale
- undertake detailed analysis of current practice
- consider ways of bringing about change
- decide on action
- plan implementation strategy
- implement and monitor changes
- evaluate success of changes against targets and report

A college adopting all these measures is likely increasingly to meet the needs of its customers and have a sense of coherence about it as it moves systematically towards achieving its mission. It is also more likely to become one of the 'self-critical institutions which set and achieve high standards' described by the English Funding Council's Chief Inspector in the *Times Educational Supplement* (TES, 16 February 1996).

1. Why self assessment?

Self assessment is an essential component of quality improvement. There is a growing recognition of the central role of self assessment in improving the quality of provision for customers. Self-assessing colleges make judgements about their own performance, based on their mission, objective evidence and the views of customers. This enables them to celebrate areas of success and identify areas in need of further development. These in turn are used to identify priority areas for action which help frame the next planning cycle, which will also identify implementation strategies and set improvement targets. Monitoring the achievement of these targets will bring the process around full circle, ready for the next cycle of continuous improvement.

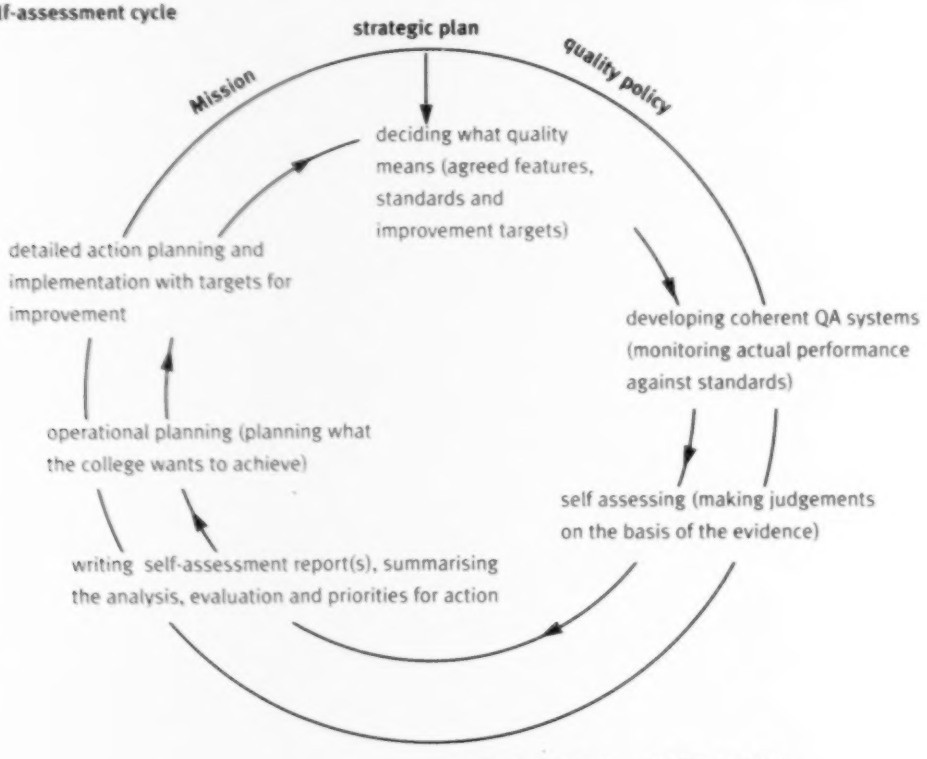
Self-assessing colleges, therefore, are not only more likely to meet the needs of their customers, they are also more likely to survive, prosper and be seen to deliver quality provision, which will encourage further growth. Moreover, there are many who would equate the ability to self-assess with the maturity of the FE sector.

'Colleges ought now to pay more attention to objective self-assessment if they are to be recognised as self-critical communities sufficiently mature to be given responsibility for their own quality assurance.' (Chief Inspector's report 1994/5, FEFC, November 1995)

Self assessment therefore is only one stage in an ongoing cycle of quality improvement which encompasses the following:

- a general approach to quality, based on the college mission and outlined in a quality policy
- a clear and shared definition of quality
- ways of measuring that quality
- a regular and systematic evaluation of performance against agreed standards (self assessment)
- the identification of priorities for action
- clear implementation strategies to achieve agreed improvement targets embedded into the college planning cycle
- evaluation of success

Figure 1: Self-assessment cycle


strategic plan
Mission
quality policy
deciding what quality means (agreed features, standards and improvement targets)
detailed action planning and implementation with targets for improvement
developing coherent QA systems (monitoring actual performance against standards)
operational planning (planning what the college wants to achieve)
self assessing (making judgements on the basis of the evidence)
writing self-assessment report(s), summarising the analysis, evaluation and priorities for action

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Colleges have always undertaken activities associated with quality improvement, but practice across institutions has sometimes been patchy and dependent on the enthusiasm and expertise of individuals. Recently there has been a growing awareness of the need for a more consistent, systematic and college-wide approach.

Clearly the growing emphasis on self-assessment must be seen in the different legislative and funding contexts of England and Wales. Details of both, together with a brief discussion of the relationship between self assessment, external assessment and quality audit, can be found in Appendices 1 and 2.

2. Quality policies and definitions

There are many definitions of quality: some focus on fitness for purpose, others on excellence. Many stress the importance of meeting or exceeding customer expectation. *Making Quality Your Own* (FEU, 1995) suggests that any college definition of quality is likely to take into account:

- the needs of internal and external customers and the wider community
- the college's own professional criteria (which will develop from its mission and strategic direction)
- the requirements of external stakeholders

A college quality policy needs not only to articulate the general approach, but also to:

- outline methods
- identify where responsibility for maintaining and improving quality lies
- outline the systems in existence or about to be introduced
- describe where more detailed information is available, e.g. flowcharts of processes, public standards and quality manuals
- give a date for review of the policy

General definitions and policies, however, tend to be broad. While this is important for strategic reference, college activities will need to be broken down in some way in order to be operationally useful for quality assurance purposes.

As the seven aspects of colleges outlined in *Assessing Achievement* (FEFC 93/28) are used in England to organise and report on inspectors' external assessments of colleges, and many colleges have also based their self-assessment reports on them, it may make sense for English colleges to use these headings.

In Wales quality assessment is based on five institutional dimensions and seven dimensions for each of 19 programme areas. Again, it may be helpful to use these headings in thinking about quality in colleges.

Appendix 2 gives more details about the framework in each country.

Colleges, may, however, choose different headings, particularly if they have already been identifying key processes in the college. This approach, known as Business Process Re-engineering (BPR), has the advantage of encouraging identification of over-complicated or inconsistent practices, via techniques such as flowcharting. Thereafter processes can be streamlined to deliver agreed quality features. (BPR is outlined in *Making Quality Your Own* FEU, 1995 and flowcharting and other techniques are described in *Continuous Improvement and Quality Standards* FEU, 1994).

Having decided on how college activities are to be broken down, the next stage is to agree the desired features or quality criteria of each. While the Welsh framework (SPAEM/ OHMCI, 1994) and *Assessing Achievement*, especially appendix A, provide helpful guidance, colleges need to customise the criteria to reflect their own needs. It is also important to remember that both inspection frameworks are shortly to be reviewed and, no doubt, developed further. In other words, definitions of quality need to be customised and developed over time.

Apart from reference to the funding councils assessment frameworks and to the quality requirements from other agencies, there are several techniques to help colleges decide upon the desired features or quality criteria of aspects of their provision. One is to ask internal and external customers (staff, students, employers, etc.) what they consider the desired features of a particular aspect of the college .

Example 1: Teaching and learning

All teams, the senior management team and the learning support team as well as programme teams, could be asked to develop their own desired features of teaching and learning, using the appropriate section of the assessment framework as a starting point. Reference may also need to be made to other documents, such as the *Awarding Bodies Common Accord* (NCVQ, 1993) for NVQs and the *GNVQ Quality Criteria* (NCVQ,1995). Groups of students and employers on advisory groups could be asked to do the

same. It would then be possible to identify agreed criteria for adoption across the college. This approach has the advantage of raising awareness of quality in teaching and learning and providing a common language for discussion within the college. It also maximises potential general ownership of the criteria, encouraging staff and others to evaluate their practice on an ongoing basis.

Similar exercises could be used to identify the desired features of the other aspects of colleges — student achievement, governance and management, student recruitment, guidance and support; or, in Wales, management and organisation, responsiveness of the institution.

In each case, appropriate groups should be involved in identifying the desired features but in general terms both the staff who provide the service and the customers of that service should be consulted. Several colleges found that their governors wished to contribute to developing quality criteria for the governance of the college.

In drawing up lists of desired features reference will need to be made to the relevant requirements of external bodies other than those outlined in the assessment frameworks. These might include NCVQ, TECs and DfEE, for example (see *Making Quality Your Own* FEU, 1995 for more details).

Nationally there is now a commitment to work towards greater convergence or alignment of these various requirements, as they are reviewed.

Colleges may also wish to consider the features of best practice elsewhere in the sector, or indeed beyond it, in informing their decisions (see *Benchmarking* FEU, 1995).

Once all the responses and requirements have been collated, duplications will need to be eliminated and a few key features selected for each aspect of the college.

One technique to help ensure the central importance of features, is two-dimensional surveying. This involves asking customers to rate the desired features of a service in two ways: firstly in terms of the feature's importance to them and secondly in relation to current performance.

The results of such an exercise can be collated and presented very simply in terms of those features which are of :

- high importance and currently highly rated
- high importance and lowly rated
- low importance and highly rated
- low importance and lowly rated

This exercise not only gives some indication of the desired features which customers think are most important, but also indicates which areas might be priorities for improvement (high importance/low current performance).

Example 2: Desired features of teaching and learning

In the hypothetical example below, draft desired features for teaching and learning were proposed and tested with a number of students, in terms of importance and rating. They were also asked to add any other feature they thought was important.

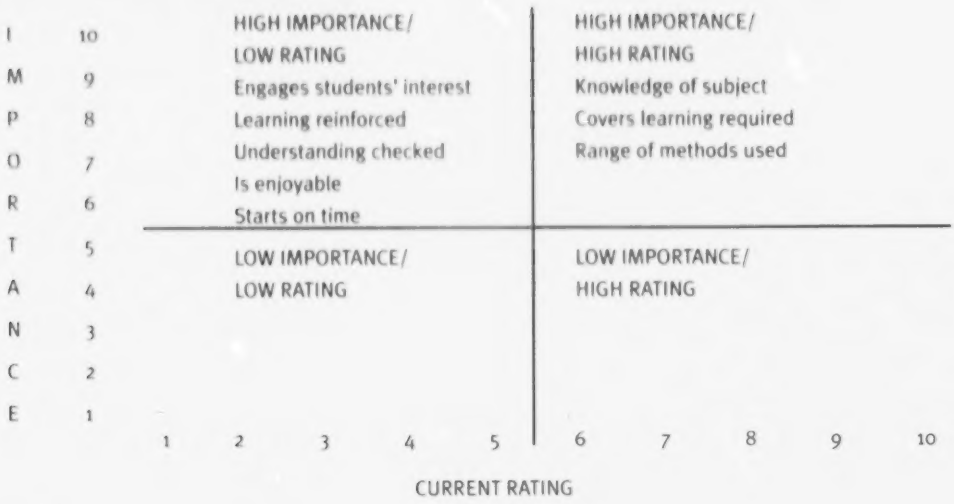
(Scale used: 10 = very important or very good; 1 = not important, not good)

Desired features	Importance	Rating
1. teacher has sound knowledge base	9	6
2. engages students' interest	8	2
3. learning is regularly reinforced	7	5
4. wide range of methods used	6	6
5. covers learning required	8	7
6. checks understanding	8	4
7. is enjoyable	6	3
8. other (please specify)		

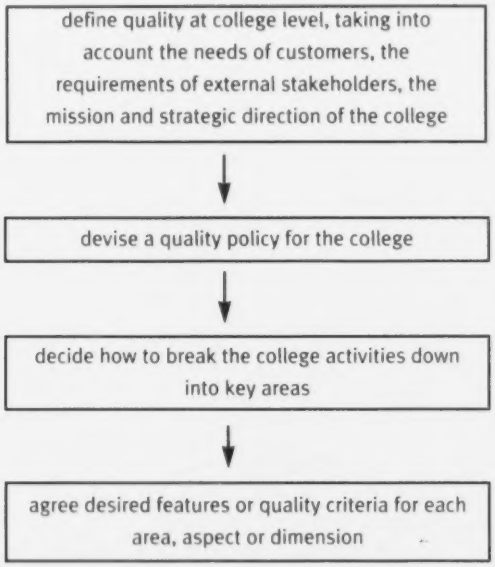
Under 'other', 40% of students listed 'starts on time' as important (6 or above) and its average rating was 4.

The results are presented diagrammatically in Figure 2 on the next page. This analysis shows that all the desired features proposed were considered important by the students although starting on time was one that had been missed. It also shows the areas where practice is already perceived as good (high rating) and most importantly indicates priorities for improvement in those features given high importance but a low rating.

Figure 2: Two-dimensional feature rating



Defining quality: summary flowchart


define quality at college level, taking into account the needs of customers, the requirements of external stakeholders, the mission and strategic direction of the college
devise a quality policy for the college
decide how to break the college activities down into key areas
agree desired features or quality criteria for each area, aspect or dimension

3. Developing a coherent quality assurance system

A coherent quality assurance system should provide a college with evidence for making rigorous self-assessment of performance. More specifically, it should enable a college to assure itself that explicit quality standards are being achieved and improved. It should also provide evidence for demonstrating this to others, including customers and bodies which require such evidence for funding, accreditation or inspection. (See *Making Quality Your Own*, FEU 1995, for an overview of these organisations and their requirements.)

Colleges have always been concerned with quality, and over the years a number of common activities have developed, including:

- curriculum monitoring, review and evaluation (MRE)
- internal validation procedures
- student satisfaction surveys
- analyses of participation, retention and achievement rates
- the development of service standards, often associated with college charters

However, because they frequently were developed *ad hoc* in different parts of the college over a number of years, these activities often grew without reference to commonly agreed definitions of quality or to each other. As a result, quality assurance practices have sometimes been patchy, inconsistent or overlapping, providing information of varying levels of detail without reference to the purpose for which it was collected or the use to which it would be put. Evidence for this can be found in, for example, *Quality and standards in FE in England, Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1994-5.* More recently the need for coherent, streamlined systems providing data for judgements about quality has been recognised along with growing understanding that self assessments need to inform future planning.

Once the desired features of an aspect of the college have been identified, the next step is to devise quality standards from them. Quality standards are the level of performance expected for any given feature of the service (see *Continuous Improvement and Quality Standards* FEU, 1994). For example, if speed of return of marked work is a desired feature of the teaching and learning process, the quality standard might be that all work be returned marked within five working days of being submitted.

Careful selection of the key desired features should ensure that any standards derived are centrally important rather than simply easily measured. Nonetheless standards do have to be measurable to be part of an effective and efficient quality assurance system. Making sure they are both is one of the critical skills in standard setting.

Standards can be measured, and thus monitored, in a number of ways. The most appropriate way depends partly on the type of standard. Increasingly colleges in England and Wales are required to use a series of standardised performance indicators. These tend to focus on such matters as student achievement, responsiveness and contribution to national training targets (see *Measuring Achievement*, FEFC(E) circular 94/31 and FEFCW *Performance Indicators*, FEFCW Bulletin 95/10). The English Funding Council is also proposing some standardised management statistics (see *Management Statistics for Colleges*, FEFC(E) Circular 95/28).

These performance indicators may enable colleges to monitor their performance against many of their standards. They also enable colleges to benchmark their own performance against those of others and so identify areas of strength and weakness. Some standards may need to be measured more directly. Responding to application letters within five working days, or achieving 85% attendance on full-time courses, can be measured and monitored directly from records, perhaps supplemented by sample customer surveys. Other standards may require more qualitative methods. It may be a desired feature of tutorial provision that students find it supportive. The standard derived from this might be that 90% of students rate their tutorials as supportive or very supportive. This could be measured in a student satisfaction survey.

However a standard is measured, it is important that, as far as possible, the information is recorded electronically so that it can be collated and analysed in various ways on request. As computerised management information systems (MIS) become more sophisticated and responsive, it is increasingly possible to do this. Thus reports on attendance summaries for the four schools in the engineering faculty for the month of June, or a comparison of 1993-4 and 1994-5 student satisfaction with tutorials, could be requested at any time. When such information becomes routinely and easily available in a user-friendly format, its potential for informing and enhancing day-today management decisions is enormous. This in itself can do much to ensure that potential difficulties are spotted before they become serious. Early intervention can often mean that quality standards can be maintained or improved.

There also need to be reporting mechanisms for sending regular performance reports from the college MIS to those who need them. The choice of these teams/people must reflect the need to optimise ownership of the monitoring process, as well including those with relevant authority. For example, course team leaders and student representatives may receive detailed frequent reports, senior managers and governors less frequent, summary reports.

Example 3: internal observation of teaching and learning

If the desired features of teaching and learning are negotiated and agreed across the college as in Example 2 (see page 12), it is relatively simple to develop a system of internal observation.

The desired features could be used as criteria against which teaching and learning are assessed. Some colleges also grade observed sessions using the same grade descriptors as external assessors (although it should be noted that these differ slightly in England and Wales). Standards could then be set, e.g. 95% of sessions at grade 3 or above and these could be measured by internal observation. It is usual to draw up a protocol to guide the ways in which this is undertaken, outlining who can observe whom, what to do in the case of disagreement and to what purposes the observation grades can and cannot be put. It is important that discussions about these issues are sensitively negotiated and that all procedures are transparent and fair. Sometimes observations are carried out by line managers and sometimes by peers. In some colleges students are asked to assess teaching and learning, usually on a programme-wide rather than an individual basis.

If such a system is set up, consideration will also need to be given to the degree of aggregation of the grades, whether or not they will be published internally and to whom, the setting of improvement targets and the links between observation grades and performance review. These are sensitive issues and would need to be introduced in ways which maximised ownership of the system and focused on continuous improvement of the teaching and learning process rather than personal criticism.

Such a system of internal observation would help a college assess its own performance in relation to teaching and the promotion of learning. It would also, of course, encourage staff formally to share responsibility for quality assessment and improvement in this area. Another way of doing this might be to post the agreed features of good teaching and learning on staff-room noticeboards. Colleges might also like to consider displaying such notices in classrooms, particularly if students were involved in drawing up and negotiating the agreed features.

Streamlining existing systems

The commentary so far has concentrated on building a quality assurance system from scratch. In reality, however, colleges will have many functions in place already and the task will be more to identify gaps, inconsistencies and overlap or duplication, then streamline the system to make it as efficient as possible.

Duplication can be identified by taking the quality standards and listing against them any existing measures. Where more than one measure occurs against any standard, a judgement will need to be made about which is the most appropriate or whether there is a justification for more than one. There may well be occasions when both student satisfaction and

more objective measures of performance are desired. Where no measure is recorded, consideration will need to be given as to which would be the most appropriate.

Many colleges collect vast amounts of data, sometimes so much that there is little time or energy to use it in any way. The exercise above should also enable colleges to discard superfluous information. Information should be collected for some purpose — in this case quality assurance against specified standards in order to identify priority areas for improvement — rather than because it always has been collected or might be of use one day.

It will then be necessary to return to the individual measures of quality and reconsider them in the light of the decisions made above. For instance, the student satisfaction survey may now look very different. It may well require redesigning to ensure that it does provide the college with the necessary information in an appropriate format.

Example 4: Curriculum monitoring, review and evaluation and quality assurance

Many colleges have encountered difficulties in integrating well-established procedures, such as curriculum monitoring, review and evaluation with a cross-college analysis of teaching and learning for quality assurance. English inspectors' comments on colleges' self-assessment reports show that this is often the most difficult in terms of systematic quality assurance, and yet teaching and learning lie at the heart of any college's activities. In the next inspection cycle, teaching and learning are likely to become even more important.

MRE is usually undertaken, with student involvement, at course team level, followed by a departmental and college-wide analysis. Departmental or faculty structures cut across the teaching and learning process in a college and, when analyses are undertaken in ways which mirror that structure, tensions and inconsistencies may be institutionalised. As a consequence, in some colleges MRE procedures were introduced *ad hoc* and even today practice is not always consistent across departments. Neither are summaries always used systematically to make overall analyses of strengths and areas needing further development to inform planning across the college and identify staff development needs. In many cases, the introduction of MRE in colleges pre-dates the publication of the inspection frameworks and recognition of the need for coherent cross-college quality assurance systems. .MRE procedures therefore need to be updated and perhaps modified. Nonetheless, they can provide useful measures of teaching and learning and students' achievements, as well as information about other aspects of college performance, such as course management and quality assurance itself. At their best MRE systems:

- provide course/programme teams with cross-college quality standards for teaching and learning and other aspects of programme planning and management, based on agreed desired features
- sometimes enable teams to add some of their own standards to reflect vocational/subject specialisms
- specify how to measure and monitor standards including how to seek students' views
- require teams to monitor their performance and that of their students regularly against these standards
- provide a reporting framework for teams to summarise their findings (the evidence) and their conclusions and judgements (strengths and areas for further development)
- provide an action planning framework for outlining recommended priorities for action and how to implement them (this should include identification of staff development needs and a way of bidding for additional resources or changes in college practice)
- require action plans and bids to be submitted by a given date to a specified person (e.g: head of faculty, vice-principal curriculum, quality manager) or body (e.g. academic board) so that they can inform the planning process
- ensure the specified person/body studies the reports and recommended plans carefully, aggregates the findings and recommendations, and reports upon them to the appropriate body for decisions and approval in the light of strategic directions and budgetary requirements
- ensure the specified person/body reports back to the teams within a given timescale (the important feedback loop) and agrees a final action plan, which should include success criteria and improvement targets against which to evaluate their actions

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- ensure support is given to teams experiencing difficulties, so that they can bring about the improvements required

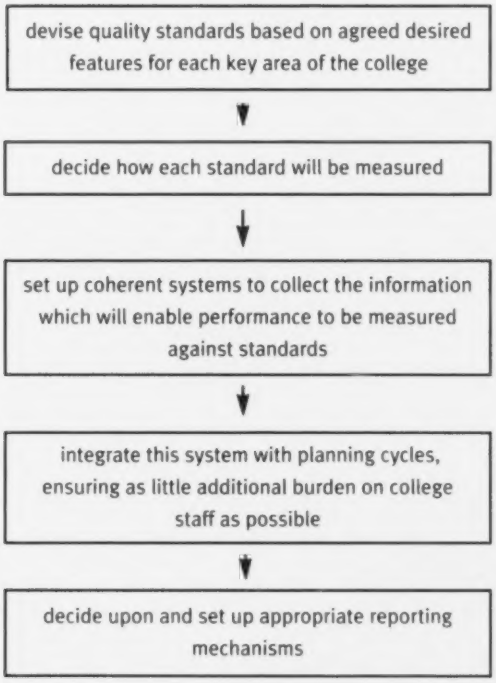
It may well be necessary for a college which wants to become self assessing to revisit its MRE procedures and ensure that:

- teams are involved in college-wide negotiation of desired features and quality standards
- MRE pro formas are evaluated in the light of these and if necessary re-designed to provide enough information to judge performance against the agreed standards
- curriculum monitoring, review and evaluation are consistently undertaken across the college
- teams understand that they are responsible for initial recommendations, action planning and implementation
- reporting mechanisms are set up for sending summaries to a specified person or body to a timescale which fits in with planning cycle
- aggregated summaries are drawn up and used systematically for planning, including staff development
- a feedback loop is set up and used to report back to teams
- MRE performance of teams and senior management is monitored and evaluated against specified standards, e.g. meeting deadlines and feeding back decisions

In Wales the assessment framework, apart from the five cross-college aspects, is centred around 19 curriculum programme areas. The external assessment of each programme area is organised around seven dimensions. In many ways, this structure more closely mirrors the ways MRE systems have traditionally operated in colleges. In England, too, colleges may find it easier to self-assess teaching and the promotion of learning and student achievement by programme area, rather on a cross-college basis.

Systematic monitoring, review and evaluation of courses or programmes against agreed standards could provide much valuable information to colleges. It is important to design the associated documentation, systems and activities in ways which maintain team ownership of the process and provide the information in summary form that can be aggregated and used for cross-college quality assurance and planning.

Developing a coherent quality assurance system: summary flowchart


devise quality standards based on agreed desired features for each key area of the college
decide how each standard will be measured
set up coherent systems to collect the information which will enable performance to be measured against standards
integrate this system with planning cycles, ensuring as little additional burden on college staff as possible
decide upon and set up appropriate reporting mechanisms

4. Systematic self-assessment or self-evaluation

Self-assessment, or self-evaluation as it is referred to in Wales, is essentially about making judgements. It involves a careful consideration and analysis of available evidence in order to make a judgement about the quality of provision.

> *'FEFCW believes that colleges have ultimate responsibility for maintaining and enhancing quality. Developing systems for self-evaluation and preparing self-evaluation reports is an integral part of good practice in managing quality. These systems provide the college with the means to evaluate its provision in a programme area and to make judgements about whether institutional aims and objectives are being met.'* (*Self-evaluation in FE Colleges in Wales*, SPAEM/OHMCI, 1994.)

Expressed like this, it is easy to understand the importance of accurate, comprehensive information available at the right level of detail and about the relevant factors. In the language of this publication, this could be rephrased to emphasise the importance of a coherent quality assurance system which provides comprehensive and accurate information about performance in relation to quality standards based on the agreed desired features of key aspects or processes of the college.

Good teachers have always assessed or evaluated their own performances. They observe the consequences of their actions, listen to feedback, analyse students' results with care and use this evidence, and more, to make judgements about their professional competence. This is the essence of the reflective practitioner. Such individual self assessment must be valued and should continue. Indeed, negotiation of the agreed desired features of teaching and learning should encourage this and provide increased awareness of its importance and a common language with which to discuss it. This in turn will promote the development of a quality culture across the whole college. It is increasingly necessary, however, for self assessment to take place more systematically, so that judgements can be made at team, programme area and whole-college level, about the quality of all the college services, including its management.

Information therefore needs to be used to discern patterns, but then judgements have to be made about the quality of the provision. This is not always a comfortable process: many people feel happier with description than evaluation. This has been apparent in the early self-assessment reports written for the English Inspectorate. Colleges have tended either to describe their activities rather than judge them or to have evaluated their performance a little generously. The Chief Inspector, FEFC(E), says in his annual report for 1994/95,

> *'Assessment by colleges ... is, on average, one grade better than the assessment by inspectors.'*

The Preparation of Self-Assessment Reports (FEU, 1995) argued that colleges should self assess because it is an essential part of systematic quality improvement, not just because they have to write a self-assessment report before inspection. However, in reality, for many colleges forthcoming inspection has been the spur to first undertaking the exercise. Many colleges then discovered that they had no definition of quality; no coherent quality assurance systems and no culture of judging quality of performance. Evidence for this can be found not just in inspectors' comments about colleges' self-assessment reports, but also in the few English colleges that have so far achieved a Grade 1 for quality assurance during their inspections. (See *Quality Assurance in Colleges* FEDA, 1995, for a description and analysis of the first five colleges to succeed in gaining the highest grade for quality assurance.)

Self assessment, then, is not easy. It involves examining data and other evidence, and considering performance self critically on the basis of it. This needs to happen throughout the college at every level from the individual and the team to the whole college. The evidence must then be used to make judgements not only about strengths, but also aspects of provision which need development in order to identify priority areas for improvement.

Example 5: Introducing self assessment

At Hugh Baird College, managers were asked to write reports for the aspect of the college for which they had primary responsibility. In order to encourage more rigorous self-assessment, an explicit ground rule was established that no judgement could be made unless it could be substantiated with data.

This example illustrates the importance of the way in which self-assessment is introduced, organised and managed. Regular, systematic and purposive reviews of performance need to be introduced, if they are not already in place. A self-assessing culture, with the focus not on criticism but on continuous quality improvement, needs to be established. This is more likely to develop where:

- there is clear senior management commitment to self-assessment and quality improvement
- staff feel ownership of the quality standards against which performance is evaluated
- staff, individually and in teams, are expected to evaluate their own performance on the basis of evidence and suggest both areas for further improvement and how it might be achieved
- self-assessments go somewhere and inform decisions and action plans. Sometimes they can seem to disappear into black holes. This tends to de-motivate and can lead to suspicion of the whole process of improving quality.
- there is a systematic feedback loop from the decision makers to the people who have undertaken the self-assessments, resulting in an agreed action plan with clear improvement targets and evaluation procedures
- at college level transparent links are made between self assessment, staff development, resource allocation and future planning generally

Off-the-shelf models of self assessment

There are off-the-shelf models of self assessment which colleges could adopt or adapt to fit their own purposes. One such is published by the British Quality Foundation in its *Guide to Self-Assessment*, 1994. Interestingly, this breaks organisational activities down for self-assessment purposes into **Enablers** and **Results**. These are further sub-divided into:

Enablers

- Leadership
- People management
- Policy and strategy
- Resources
- Processes

Results

- People satisfaction
- Customer satisfaction
- Impact on society
- Business results

Criteria are given for each of these. The general process of self-assessment is outlined as are various approaches including award simulation (for BQA awards), pro forma, matrix chart, workshop, peer involvement and questionnaire.

Self-assessment or self-evaluation reports

If self assessment is undertaken in this systematic way and forms an integral part of the way of life of a college and its planning cycles, writing a self-assessment report before a college inspection will be a relatively straightforward , since the hard work will have been done already. Indeed self assessment, as well as taking place throughout the year, should be undertaken more formally on an annual basis to inform the next planning cycle. The summary report of this, together with an update of progress since it was written, would need very

little modification to meet the English inspectorate's current requirements (see *The Preparation of Self-Assessment Reports* FEU, 1995).

In Wales the situation is slightly different in that colleges are required to write a self-evaluation report for each programme area before external assessment. Moreover, colleges are explicitly advised to follow the framework for external assessment when writing those reports:

> *'The framework is an appropriate starting point because it ensures that the approach used in self-evaluation by colleges is consistent with the current practices of external assessors.'* (*Guidelines for Self-evaluation in FE Colleges in Wales 1994-1995* SPAEM/OHMCI, 1994)

The same document outlines a number of stages needed to produce a programme area review. These are:

1. running staff development workshops
2. agreeing the criteria for assessment
3. choosing the programme area for the first review
4. choosing the staff to conduct the review
5. collecting the statistics and information about the programme area
6. using questionnaires
7. setting days aside for the review
8. arranging opportunities for observation of students in classrooms, workshops and laboratories
9. arranging opportunities for teachers to look at the coursework of students
10. using grade criteria to determine the profile
11. keeping records and writing the report
12. evaluating the review process
13. using the review process to improve the review process.

Feedback from the English inspectorate and colleges themselves suggests that self-assessment reports generally need to:

- become more genuinely evaluative and less descriptive, identifying areas which need improvement as well as strengths
- base judgements more systematically on evidence from college quality assurance systems, showing how the college performance compared with, for example, national averages
- use judgements to a greater extent to identify future areas for improvement
- show more systematic targets by which improvements can be monitored

To the extent that quality has been clearly defined, quality standards identified for key areas or processes, and a systematic and coherent quality system set up in a college, these developments will be relatively easily achievable.

Example 6: Self-assessment of college-wide student achievement

Student achievement is quite good, with results generally about or just above the national averages for both vocational and academic programmes. Value-added analyses of GCE A-level provision suggest that, compared with national norms, we add value particularly to the achievements of students who come in mostly with C grades at GCSE, but that we are relatively less successful with those at the higher ability levels. However, these average college figures conceal a range of success rates from x% in (specified) programme area to y% in (specified) programme area. We need to improve our performance in all areas, but particularly where it consistently falls below national averages. Targets have been set to improve performance by five per cent in all programme areas, with special emphasis on students in the higher ability range for GCE A-level subjects.

Retention rates still give cause for concern where they fall below 70% in (specified) programme areas. However in other areas, notably (specify) they are excellent at 92%. The college average is 74%, an improvement of 2% on last year. Returns from our early leavers survey over the last three years suggests the following are key factors in early leaving:

- programme too difficult
- lack of effective tutorial or learning support
- financial pressures

In, addition more students leave in the first half term than throughout the rest of the year, and retention is particularly low for part-time students.

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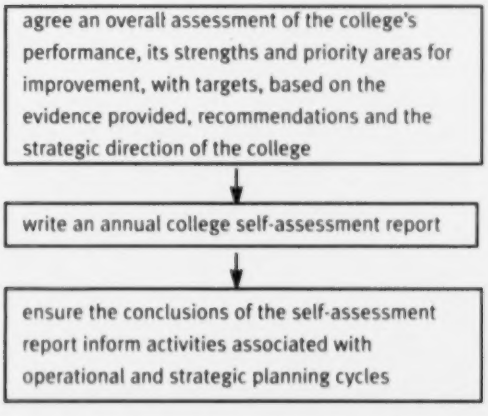
We shall therefore review our selection procedures, introduce induction programmes for all students, improve tutorial provision for part timers and improve access to learning support. Our target is to improve retention further to 76% this year. All teams have been asked to devise action plans to enable them to achieve these improvements and those whose results are significantly below the national average will be given help in drawing them up and implementing them. Achievement of the targets will be monitored and the results reported to the SMT and governors next September.

Self assessment: summary flowchart

for each key area (or, in Wales particularly, programme area):

receive regular reports from the college quality assurance system, of data showing performance against agreed quality standards
make judgements about quality of provision and recommend priority areas for action
analyse performance against standards
identify strengths and areas for further development
recommend improvement targets
write an annual self-assessment report

at college level:


agree an overall assessment of the college's performance, its strengths and priority areas for improvement, with targets, based on the evidence provided, recommendations and the strategic direction of the college
write an annual college self-assessment report
ensure the conclusions of the self-assessment report inform activities associated with operational and strategic planning cycles

At both these levels it will be important to give careful consideration to the appropriate bodies or teams to undertake these tasks, and their membership. Governors have an important role in setting improvement targets, monitoring their achievement and receiving and commenting on self-assessment reports.

5. Post-assessment action plans and action for improvement

Whether an assessment is internal to the college or undertaken by external assessors such as the Inspectorate, it should provide an overview of the college's strengths and areas where further work is needed. Assessment alone, however, is not sufficient to bring about quality improvement. After external assessments in particular, there is a temptation to ease the pressure and relax. This is especially true when good or reasonable grades, as opposed to poor ones, have been awarded. Unfortunately, the consequences are that the potential for improvement inherent in any good assessment may be lost. It is important therefore to ensure that any assessment is quickly followed by systematic action planning. In relation to external assessment, such action planning and review is mandatory and both English and Welsh Funding Councils require action within specified timescales, particularly where serious shortcomings have been identified (see *Assessing Achievement*, FEFC(E) Circular 93/28 and *Securing Improvement in the Quality of FE in Wales and Rewarding High Quality Teaching and Learning*, FEFCW Bulletin 94/21).

The assessment itself will have identified where intervention is needed and, after consideration of strategic priorities, improvement targets may already have been set.

One early key decision is to identify the persons/team with the responsibility for the improvement. One way is to give it to the staff most directly involved. For example, if the internal or external assessment identified retention and achievement in the GCE A-level programme as an area for improvement, responsibility might be given to key staff in the delivery and management of this area. Another approach is to set up *ad-hoc* groups with a more diverse membership, depending on the skills required, to take on the task on a time-limited project management basis. These groups are sometimes known as quality initiative groups. (*Continuous Improvement and Quality Standards* FEU, 1993 describes these in more detail.)

Whatever approach is adopted, the group should be clear about its remit, task and time frame. It should also be clear about the boundaries of its authority and to which body it is accountable. Some groups will be responsible not only for undertaking a detailed analysis of the difficulty, but also for finding ways of improving matters, implementing the changes and evaluating their success. Others may be asked only to recommend future action or to take implementation to a pilot stage. Having clarified its task, the group will need to draw up an action plan. This is likely to contain some or all of the following sub-headings:

- desired outcomes
- detailed analysis of current practice
- consideration of ways of bringing about improvement
- decision about nature of change(s) to be made or recommended
- planning implementation strategies
- implementing and monitoring the changes
- evaluating and reporting arrangements

Under each of these headings consideration will need to be given to what will be done, how, by whom and when.

Implementing the action plan

Improving performance involves change, and the management of change is rarely easy. It requires a complex set of high level skills which include:

- statistical analysis and the ability to draw conclusions from data
- problem-solving and decision-making skills
- people skills such as leadership, team building, motivating and enabling skills, including the ability to give constructive feedback and encourage people to try new ways
- organisational skills such as drawing up realistic meeting schedules, keeping notes of meetings and decisions

Example 7: Action planning to improve retention

The following commentary takes each stage of the action plan, indicating some of the activities involved and specific techniques that can be used.

Desired outcomes

The improvement group may well have been given very clear guidance on what is to be improved and targets to be achieved. In Example 6 the task was to improve retention and achievement on GCE A-level programmes. The targets could be to increase retention rates of those starting the programme within two years from x% to y% and to improve the percentage of students gaining pass grades from a% to b% within the same timescale.

An alternative way of measuring improvement in achievement would be to increase the value-added scores across the college or in certain subjects by a specified amount (see *Current Developments in Value Added* FEU/FEDA, 1995).

The task and targets would then need to be translated into clear objectives for the group. They should be SMART (that is: specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and timed). For example, the task and target about retention might be expressed as:

1 meet all staff involved; share task, targets and plans, seek their views and offers of help. Whole group at regular staff meeting. *By end September.*

2 study statistics, survey reports, research reports and best practice in order to investigate reasons for dropout and ways of minimising it (*AB and CD by end October*).

3 consider outcomes of 2 above and use conclusions to draw up a draft improvement plan. *Whole group by early November.*

4 consult staff on draft plan, make any amendments and finalise plan, ensuring all relevant staff have copies and know the implications. *Whole group with SMT member by end November.*

5 implement the plan, with monthly monitoring meetings at 4.30 first Tuesdays of months starting December. *All named people.*

6 evaluate success against targets and decide on detailed plans for following year. *Whole group, July.*

Detailed analysis of current practice

This stage corresponds particularly to objective 2 above. It might be further broken down into:

1 collect and analyse retention rates for all GCE A-level subjects over the last five years, identifying significant patterns. *AB by mid October.*

(It is important to undertake this step rigorously and objectively and not to assume the reasons are known already.)

2 study the results of three most recent follow-up studies of early A-level leavers and identify key reasons for drop-out. *CD by mid October.*

3 look at subjects/areas with highest retention rates within the college and elsewhere (benchmarking or research reports) and identify likely causes. *AB and CD by late October.*

Techniques to consider:

1 pattern identification, e.g. is retention similar across all subjects, or higher in some? Are drop-out rates consistent over time or higher at certain times of the year? Is high/low retention significantly correlated with other factors such as high satisfaction with tutorial provision or very low qualifications on entry?

2 benchmarking (see *Benchmarking* FEU, 1995)

Considering how to improve

Although the detailed analysis might be done by one or two, it is probably worth involving more people with a variety of expertise at this stage.

Having received the report from the researchers, outlining the significant patterns of retention in the college and possible reasons, the group will need to consider what to do about it. If AB and CD find that drop-out was much higher in some subjects than others; for all subjects there was a significantly higher level of drop out in the first half term and the last half term of the two years; a high percentage of those who left were in paid work for more than ten hours a week; and low retention was associated with dissatisfaction with tutorial provision and low qualifications on entry, the following actions might be considered:

1 further staff development on tutorial skills

2 re-examination of entry criteria and advice and guidance practice after GCSE results

3 provision of additional support at the times of most risk

4 ensuring that the possible effects on retention of working for money were discussed with students at guidance interviews and during induction

Techniques to consider:

1 fish-bone analysis

2 flowcharting the process to identify any gaps or inconsistencies (in this case the provision of tutorial and other support)

(See *Continuous Improvement and Quality Standards* FEU, 1994, for more details of both techniques.)

Decision about the nature of change(s) to be made/ recommended

Having considered the possibilities, the group will eventually have to decide what to do. Sometimes it will have the authority to decide this; sometimes it may have to propose a course of action to another body. Whichever is the case, it is important that ownership of the changes is maximised. It follows therefore that the people who will be affected by the changes should be fully informed and, where possible, consulted. Moreover, care should be taken to couch any communications in terms of further improvement rather than as personal criticism. The more staff are used to receiving data about their students and analysing it for patterns, the more likely they are to see for themselves where change is needed. Where there is a culture of the teacher as action researcher, there is much more enthusiasm for implementing new ways because they know why it is likely to benefit their students.

Planning the implementation strategies

Having decided what to do, it is important to plan how to introduce the changes. A number of factors need to be taken into account including:

- the pace and timing of the changes
- any staff development needed first
- how staff will be briefed
- who will be responsible for what
- how the changes will be monitored and evaluated

Clearly these decisions will need to be informed by the nature of the changes but they also need to take account of the nature of the college and its staff. Again the principle of maximising ownership of the changes should guide decisions.

Implementing and monitoring the change

This is the most important stage of all and yet it is curiously often missing from action plans. Once the detailed plans for change have been drawn up it is important for one person or team to be given responsibility to oversee the changes, monitor progress and respond quickly to the inevitable unforeseen difficulties. It is not sufficient to assume that everything will inevitably go to plan.

Evaluating and reporting arrangements

Once changes have been introduced they need to be evaluated. Where clear improvement targets were set at the beginning this will be comparatively easy. If the targets have not been met, it will be important to consider whether more of the same is required, i.e. the right things are being done but the timescale was too ambitious; whether other interventions are needed, i.e.: the changes were not the right ones; or whether further research is needed.

The report to the appropriate body will probably need to include the following:

- an outline of the area to be improved and the improvement target set
- a brief summary of the changes made
- an evaluation of the outcomes of the changes, with particular emphasis on the achievement of the targets, but also with reference to any unintended consequences and whether these were positive or negative
- any recommendation of further action

Such a report should be used to inform future planning. Care should also be taken that the group is thanked for their efforts and that where there is positive changes, staff are congratulated on their success.

If such an action plan is drawn up, implemented and evaluated, it will be possible to demonstrate the extent of any improvement at the next self-assessment point and bring the quality assurance cycle full circle.

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Post-assessment action plans: summary flowchart

identify the improvement team and its remit including its relationship to the college management structure
team to clarify its task, authority, targets and timescale
undertake detailed analysis of current practice
consider ways of bringing about change
decide on action to be taken
plan implementation strategy
implement and monitor changes
evaluate success of changes against targets and report

6. Conclusions

Self-assessment, on the basis of evidence, followed by quality improvement must become a way of life for everyone to ensure a successful organisation. If a college systematically and carefully develops such a culture, it is likely increasingly to meet the needs of its customers and to prosper.

If a college:

- adopts a general approach to quality, articulated in a quality policy
- has a shared definition of what it means by quality
- collects evidence from a variety of sources about whether it has been achieved
- considers the evidence carefully and makes judgements based on it about strengths and areas for improvement
- systematically plans for and implements changes leading to quality improvement
- evaluates again

then there will be a coherence about it, a sense of all activities and processes helping move the college purposively and successfully towards achieving its mission. This is the challenge. Colleges meeting this challenge will indeed become 'self-critical institutions which set and achieve high standards'.

Whatever detail emerges from the review of the inspection/assessment frameworks in England and Wales, and to whatever extent convergence of quality requirements becomes a reality, such colleges will be well placed to respond positively.

Appendix 1: The legislative context in England and Wales

In recent years there have been fundamental changes in the ways in which colleges are funded, governed, managed and inspected. These changes, many of which flowed from the Further and Higher Education Act (1992), have been widely reported elsewhere here, but four are perhaps worthy of particular mention in the context of self-assessment:

- a funding methodology which rewards retention and achievement as well as numbers of enrolments (see *Funding Learning*, FEFC(E), 1992 and, in Wales, *The New Recurrent Funding Methodology*, Bulletin 94/1) and a growing interest in the publication of examination results and other performance indicators
- a requirement for all colleges to develop and submit strategic plans
- an inspection or external assessment framework, which both inspects colleges' own quality assurance systems and requires them to write self-assessment or self-evaluation reports. (See *Assessing Achievement*, FEFC circular 93/28 in England and *Guidelines for Self-evaluation in FE Colleges in Wales*, SPAEM/OHMCI, 1994)
- an announcement in February 1996 by the FEFC(E) that the inspection framework for the next four-yearly cycle, starting in 1997, will place even greater emphasis on self-assessment, with, it is proposed, colleges invited to bid to become accredited self-critical institutions

The Act requires the Further Education Funding councils of England and Wales to secure provision for assessing the quality of education. They are, in other words, held accountable by the government for the quality of provision in colleges in the FE sector. The way in which they have done this in the first instance has been to set up systems of external inspection or assessment, preceded by self-assessment reports and followed by action plans. Such systems of external assessment are, however, expensive and labour intensive to maintain, and it seems likely that, to a greater or lesser extent, both English and Welsh Funding Councils will move towards a greater emphasis upon self-assessment in the future, with a correspondingly lighter touch for external assessments. The extent of this shift in emphasis is becoming clearer particularly in England.

Nonetheless there is a tension between the need for public accountability on the one hand and the desire for self-assessment on the other. Suggested ways forward are often polarised — direct external assessment of provision being contrasted with an audit of colleges' quality assurance systems. With the latter, the assessment of provision is undertaken by the institution itself and the role of the external body becomes that of auditing the internal quality assurance system.

The distinction, however, need not be so sharp. It is possible to envisage a framework which would start with an audit of the internal quality assurance system and lead either to the conclusion that the system was sufficiently robust to justify the judgements made on the evidence from it, or that there was room for doubt. If the system was not judged to be rigorous enough, then a direct external assessment of provision could follow and be compared with the self-assessment.

This is essentially what is being proposed for the next four-yearly inspection cycle in England, with colleges being able to put themselves forward as self-critical institutions, and being accredited as such if their self-assessments are judged to be sufficiently rigorous and they are setting and achieving high standards. Such colleges will thereafter be subject to a lighter touch in terms of external inspections.

In short, the time has come for self assessment and its importance looks likely to continue to grow.

Appendix 2: The inspection/assessment frameworks in England and Wales

In England the seven aspects of colleges outlined in *Assessing Achievement* (FEFC Circular 93/28) are:

1 Responsiveness and range of provision
2 governance and management
3 Students' recruitment, guidance and support
4 Teaching and the promotion of learning
5. Students' achievements
6. Quality assurance
7. Resources: staffing; equipment/learning resources; accommodation

In Wales the framework is different.

Quality assessment is based on 19 specified programme areas and each is assessed against given criteria within the following dimensions:

1. Nature and scope of provision
2. Curriculum design and development
3. Appropriateness, management and use of resources
4. Quality of teaching and learning
5. Standards attained by students
6. Management of quality
7. Students' overall experience.

Five institutional dimensions are also assessed:

- Institutional aims and objectives
- Responsiveness of the institution
- Quality of service to students
- Standards attained by students
- Management and organisation

(See *Framework for the Assessment of Quality in Further Education 1994-95*, SPAEM/OHMCI).

There are, however, many similarities with the English framework. In England, too, Teaching and the Promotion of Learning and Student Achievement are also largely assessed in programme areas. It also seems likely that in the next inspection cycle there will be even more emphasis on programme areas, teaching and learning, student achievements and quality assurance, with an increasing focus on data analysis. Both these frameworks are now under review.

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